

Leaving a garden

By [Beth Merrill Neel](#)

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Every morning as I walk the dog I pass by my neighbors' garden, which is beautiful. I think it took them a long time to get it to the place it is today, filled with beauty and grace and some whimsy. They've lived there more than 20 years, and I imagine they've been working on the garden for that long. It's a gift to me, and to the neighborhood.

When I was young, my grandparents lived in Tacoma. The railroad tracks ran a few blocks away from their back yard, and when we spent the night there, we heard the trains go by in the early hours of the morning. They lived next door to a diner, and when we'd get off the plane and drive to their house, we'd stop for lunch there and get hamburgers and wild blackberry milkshakes. It was heaven.

My grandparents had gardens there, too: my grandmother grew roses and my grandfather had a vegetable garden. Tried as he did, he never could get me to like lima beans, but he'd delight us with funny-shaped carrots and new peas. Standing in the garden you could see Mt. Rainier in the distance, haughty and majestic and cold, such a contradiction from my grandparents' sweet, small plots.

My grandfather died in that house. A few years later, as the neighborhood changed and the diner became a massage parlor, my grandmother left. The gardens went fallow. The house was sold and eventually some owner tore it down—it and the massage parlor—and now a strip mall occupies that space.

I miss the house, with the view from the upstairs window of the drive-in far away, and the llama rug my uncle brought back from Venezuela. I miss the dog run and the old black lab, Lady, who lived there. I miss the shed attached to the garage, full of Grandma's canning. I miss her roses, and I even miss his lima beans. I miss them more, of course, but it has been a long time since they died.

I think about what it must have been like for my grandmother to leave that place and that garden. I think about all those people who spend decades planting seeds, and tending to the plants, pruning and weeding and sometimes throwing something

out and sometimes starting all over again. A garden is so personal, such an effort of labor and imagination and hope. And patience. I can't imagine what it's like to leave such a labor of love.

I wonder if God was sad when Adam and Eve left that garden, sad that there was no one there to tend it anymore, or simply to appreciate it. It's such a lovely founding myth, the Eden story. We know how Adam and Eve fared; they made it out alive and started over, but life was different after they left the garden.

It always is.

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